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# Refraining or Resisting: Responses of Green Movement Supporters to Repression During the 2013 Iranian Presidential Elections

Ali Honari and Jasper Muis  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

## Abstract

Findings on the effect of repression on political participation are mixed and inconclusive. This article addresses this puzzle by introducing and conceptualizing 'responses to repression' as individuals' varying willingness to risk-taking and continuing with political activities despite possible threats. We use three-wave panel survey data and focus on the run-up to the 2013 Iranian presidential elections, during which the gradual decline in political participation of Green Movement supporters turned into a remarkable increase in activism. The findings indicate that the decision to either refrain from or resist repression plays an important role in explaining some forms of political participation. And, in turn, this decision to either refrain or resist is influenced by social-psychological factors: Iranian Green Movement (IGM) supporters who experienced less fear, were more aggrieved and perceived lower levels of repression than other supporters, were more inclined to embrace risks. Consequently, they more frequently engaged in everyday forms of resistance – covert activities, which are difficult to be controlled and surveilled by states. It implies that social movement supporters in repressive contexts cannot only ignore the risks associated with activism and continue with the same activity but can also find or invent other forms of political activity to resist repression.

## Policy implications

- The article demonstrates the relevance of individual agency and social movement supporters' responses to repression for understanding political participation in the case of severe repression.
- Mobilizing and shaping people's perceptions of their grievances, fears and levels of repression are effective instruments to enhance the willingness of risk-taking, and continuing with political activities despite possible threats.
- To grasp and push for democratic change, policy makers should not only focus on the most tangible disruptive protest forms, such as street demonstrations but also acknowledge the importance of more covert everyday forms of resistance, such as persuasion activities by movement supporters in face-to-face and online discussions.

## 1. Varying political participation, despite constant repression

In the week before the 2013 Iranian presidential elections, the Wall Street Journal reported: 'Iran's security officials warned that they would crackdown on any opposition activity in the run-up to the elections. At the last two opposition events, security forces carried out more than a dozen arrests' (Fassihi, 2013). Despite the hostile environment, Iranian Green Movement (IGM) supporters, particularly grassroots and young activists, became active to support voting for a moderate candidate (Honari, 2019; Kadivar and Abedini, 2020). Their activities were so widespread and influential that the Green Movement's revival was dubbed an 'electoral uprising' (Harris, 2013).

The main mantra of the mobilization campaign – 'I vote!' – is an adaption of four years earlier: during the spontaneous protests that broke out after the disputed presidential elections in 2009, the IGM had arisen with the slogan 'Where is my vote?'. Along with unprecedented street

demonstrations in post-revolutionary Iran, online activism flourished, to the extent that commentators called it 'Iran's Twitter Revolution' (Iran's Twitter Revolution, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The peaceful post-election protests were severely cracked down by the government.

The IGM is an alliance of pro-democratic groups whose supporters range from those who seek gradual changes within the system to those who want radical change relying on confrontational tactics. It differs from most conventional NGOs and citizen-based groups in the sense that it has an organic and bottom-up means of organization, and therefore lacks a clearly demarcated membership base. The IGM has no hierarchical structure and formal organization with affiliated members (Milani, 2010). As Bayat (2013) explains, both repression and the use of social media have conditioned the IGM into an 'unstructured', 'leaderless' organization – a model of social movement activism that also characterized the Arab uprisings in 2011.

Despite severe repression, the IGM challenged the Iranian government for several years, through different forms of

activities, both off- and online. But toward the end of 2012, the activities of the Iranian Green Movement had almost come to a halt. The two reformist candidates Mehdi Karubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, whose votes were 'stolen' in the 2009 presidential elections, have been put under house arrest since 2011 and the boycott of the 2012 parliamentary elections had not resulted in any tangible achievements, in the sense that it had not revitalized the movement by uniting it.

Not surprisingly, some observers claimed that the movement's demise was because of sustained state repression.<sup>2</sup> However, in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections, the political activities of IGM supporters increased, despite the unchanged level of repression. This leads to the question of how to explain the political participation of Iranian Green Movement supporters, or the lack thereof, under severe and constant levels of repression.

In order to better understand collective action in repressive contexts, this article draws our attention to the micro-level and individual choices. We argue that understanding what differentiates social movement supporters who refrain from political activities because of possible threats from those who resist repression can help us to comprehend why repression can have different effects on political participation. Doing so, this article, speaks to the approach that puts individual agency at the centre of accounts for political participation in contexts where repression matters.

Following the prevailing approach of considering activism as being deterred by state repression, we first test the hypothesis that IGM supporters who perceive more repression are less politically active than those who perceive less repression. We focus on a time period when the gradual decline in political participation of IGM supporters turned into a remarkable increase in activism during the 2013 presidential elections: February–June 2013. We find that, whereas perceived repression among IGM supporters remained unchanged during that period, their political participation significantly changed. Hence, the data show that changes in perceived repression cannot fully account for the overall increase in political participation.

Subsequently, we scrutinize this puzzle by turning our attention to what we call 'responses to repression'. This concept captures the notion that risk-taking varies among individuals and is shaped by social-psychological factors: whether activists are inclined to refrain from political activities because of possible threats or rather resist repression. In a similar vein, Ayanian and Tausch (2016) make a distinction between perceived risks associated with activism (i.e. perceived repression) and the importance people attach to those risks (i.e. response to repression).

Interestingly, we find that IGM activists, on average, less often refrained from political activities during the two months preceding the elections than the two months preceding that period, while the average level of perceived repression remained unchanged.

Therefore, in the next step, we examine what accounts for individuals' choices between refraining from political activities as a response to repression and resisting

repression. We focus on four social-psychological motives of political participation that may differentiate between individuals who resist repression from those who refrain from political activities: emotions, perceived efficacy, identity, and grievances. Social psychologists identified these as the four main motives fostering political engagement (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013).

To summarize, we generally find that while perceived repression does not directly affect political participation, it does influence social movement supporters' inclination to either refrain or resist. In turn, these varying individual responses to repression play an important role in explaining some forms of political participation, namely everyday forms of resistance – covert activities, which are difficult to be controlled and surveilled by states. And, in turn, this decision to either refrain or resist is influenced by social-psychological motivations: Iranian Green Movement supporters who experienced less fear, were more aggrieved and perceived lower levels of repression than other supporters, were more inclined to embrace risks.

## 2. Theoretical background

Findings on the effect of repression on participation are mixed and inconclusive (For reviews, see Earl, 2011; Honari, 2018b). Some scholars concluded that repression negatively affects political participation and silences social movements (Boykoff, 2006; Ellefsen, 2016; Wood, 2007), whereas others found that it enhances participation in protests (Almeida, 2008; Loveman, 1998; McAdam, 1990). Still, others argued that the relationship between the level of repression and political participation generally corresponds to a reversed U-curve (Gurr, 1970; Khawaja, 1993). Scholars have made three important points to explain the above-mentioned variation in the effects of repression, which we will clarify in what follows.

### 2.1. Perceived repression

First, despite being embedded in the same repressive political context, people have different perceptions about the likelihood of risks associated with activism. As, for instance, Press (2015) shows in the case of Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, structural opportunities at the macro-level do not necessarily explain social movement activities. Thus, to understand the effect of repression at the individual level, scholars pay attention to *perceived* repression (Kurzman, 1996). In other words, to understand how repression influences individuals' political participation, the first step is to scrutinize how state repression is perceived by individuals. As Maher (2010, p. 255) explained, in repressive contexts 'states often intentionally limit information about structural changes'. Therefore, perceived repression at the individual level can be unrelated to the level of state repression at the macro level (Honari, 2018a; Kurzman, 1996). For this reason, 'objective' repression – what states do – should be distinguished from 'subjective' repression – what individuals perceive (Kurzman, 1996; Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991).

Moreover, perceived repression among individuals/activists can vary (Kurzman, 1996).

Initial thoughts on perceived repression treated it as synonymous with increasing costs, which would have a direct deterrent effect on political participation (Olson, 1965). Olson (1965) suggested that rational and self-interested individuals will (not) act to achieve the common good on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation. Thus, in this view, which still prevails as the conventional wisdom, (perceived) repression – as the cost of participation that outweighs its benefit – decreases the likelihood of political participation. Accordingly, we will first hypothesize a negative direct effect of perceived repression:

**Hypothesis 1:** *The higher the level of perceived repression, the less individuals participate in political activities.*

## 2.2. Response to repression

The second important point is that, while facing similar risks, some people are more risk-taking than others. Surprisingly, people's response to repression as an independent factor has been largely ignored in the repression scholarship. As Jasper (2004) pointed out, the unbalanced attention for agency of actors (state and citizens) has been in favor of the state. In fact, repressive states are viewed as more powerful and more determining actors than repressed citizens, which is rooted in the tendency to label people under repression as victimized people.

Our argument to include agency of citizens into the study of repression elaborates on, among others, a notable study of Egyptian activists during the 2013 anti-coup uprising of Ayanian and Tausch (2016). Highlighting the subjective importance of risk, it argued that 'the expected likelihood of being harmed can be distinguished from the extent to which individuals perceive that risk is important' (Ayanian and Tausch, 2016, p. 704). Put differently, some people may attach more importance to the risks associated with repression than others (Honari, 2018a). Since their study only focuses on the particular case of Egypt, Ayanian and Tausch (2016, p. 714) aptly stress that 'future research should consider the role of risk perceptions in different intergroup contexts'. Hence, we contribute to the generalizability of previous results.

Downplaying and/or disregarding the risks of potential threats resembles the notion of 'individual bravery' – the willingness to engage in risky protest (Kurzman, 2012). We likewise draw the attention of repression scholars to the choice of individuals (individuals' responses to repression) between refraining and resisting: individuals can attempt to manage the risk of participation and/or take these risks for granted. We place individuals' responses to repression – what Ayanian and Tausch label 'subjective importance of risk' – as a mediator between perceived repression and political participation. Hence, we test the interrelationship between perceived repression, response to repression and political participation. This yields the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2:** *The higher the level of perceived repression, the less willing social movement supporters are to embrace risks of potential threats associated with engagement in activities (i.e. they respond to repression).*

**Hypothesis 3:** *The less willing social movement supporters are to embrace risks of potential threats, the less often they participate in political activities.*

## 2.3. Micro-mobilization and social-psychological factors

Third, to explain variation in the effects of repression on participation, scholars draw attention to micro-mobilization processes at the micro-level, which can simultaneously decrease and increase political participation. Opp and Roehl (1990, pp. 540–541) state that 'depending on the strength of repression and the extent to which micro-mobilization processes provide positive incentives to protest, the direct deterring effect of repression is endorsed, overcompensated (i.e. a radicalizing effect is generated), or neutralized (i.e. there is no effect)'.

Opp and Roehl (1990) theorized and empirically showed that perceived repression not only has a direct negative effect on political participation, but also an indirect positive effect through 'micro-mobilization processes'. For instance, perceived repression may generate moral indignation and social incentives to participate in protests (Goodwin et al., 2004; Opp, 2009); or, it may both foster ideology and increase the degree of embeddedness of individuals in political networks and, in turn, radicalize political participation (Loveman, 1998; McAdam, 1986, 1990). Consequently, the variation of repression effects can be explained by weighing the balance between the direct effect of perceived repression and indirect effects *via* micro-mobilization processes.

The earlier cited study of Ayanian and Tausch (2016) similarly scrutinized how perceived risks associated with activism – which we denote as 'perceived repression' – shapes participation motivations and how those motivations, in turn, influence one's willingness to participate. In their view, social-psychological factors (i.e. motivations) such as identification, anger, and efficacy are thus, mediators between perceived repression and political participation. Furthermore, according to Ayanian and Tausch (2016), individuals' risk importance is dependent on these social-psychological factors.

We likewise argue that, like political participation, individuals' responses to repression can be influenced by micro-mobilization processes. To investigate factors that influence responses to repression, we should consider social-psychological factors that encourage (or discourage) individuals to resist repression and ignore possible threats. Therefore, we will now discuss which social-psychological factors may affect responses to repression and what the direction of the effect would be. Social-psychological approaches to protest generally argue that four fundamental reasons explain why people take part in collective political action: in

addition to grievances, with which 'it all starts with', we can distinguish instrumentality, identity, and emotions – in particular group-based anger (Klandermans, 2015, p. 219).

Earlier, classical social psychological approaches to political participation underline the role of *grievances*. Applying the frustration-aggression mechanism, Gurr (1970) suggested that 'relative deprivation' increases the intensity of grievances, which may elicit anger and violent political activities in societies. In fact, grievances can increase levels of political participation indirectly through increasing the likelihood of the choice of resisting repression. We therefore likewise hypothesize that grievances can also directly influence responses to repression.

Next, resource mobilization models and rational choice theory stress instrumental motives and suggest that rational individuals take part in political action if they believe that their individual and/or group political action is likely to be successful. Under repression, increasing perceived costs and decreasing the likelihood of success can negatively influence the feeling of *efficacy* of political actions, which, in turn, decreases the likelihood of participation. Yet, on the contrary, if people see their own or group activities efficacious – for instance, as a result of political opportunities (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996) – they may more often take the risk of repression and respond to repression by not refraining from political activity.

Social constructionist approaches reintroduced *emotions*, and added *identity* and framing to social movement studies in general and to the repression scholarship in particular. They suggest that individuals' political participation not only depends on the weighing of (perceived) costs and (perceived) benefits, and perceived efficacy, but also upon how emotions are constructed, how individual and group identity is shaped, and how circumstances and grievances are framed. Emotions can both boost political participation and contribute to the decline of social movements, depending on whether more mobilizing emotions – either positive, such as hope and joy, or negative, such as indignation and anger (Jasper, 2011) – or demobilizing emotions – such as fear and despair (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001) – prevail. According to Goodwin and Pfaff (2001), the effect of repression depends on the effectiveness of management or mitigation of people's fear. Fear can paralyze people in response to repression, but anger can be the basis for mobilization (Jasper, 1998) and for resisting repression. Hence, we extend the earlier mentioned conceptual framework of Ayanian and Tausch (2016) – which only includes 'anger' – by including a demobilizing emotion (fear) and a positive mobilizing emotion (hope).

Moreover, it is well established that identification with a social category positively influences the likelihood of acting for that very social group (Sturmer and Simon, 2004; Tajfel, 1981) and when the identification is politicized, the influence would be fostered (Simon and Klandermans, 2001). There is also evidence that participation increases the politicized collective identity (Klandermans et al., 2002). In fact, politicized identification and activism are interrelated (Curtin et al., 2016). Thus, we assume that, among people who

support a social movement, (de)mobilizing emotions and self-identification as an activist may influence the choice between refraining and resisting.

To sum up, as four key social-psychological factors, in this study, we focus on grievances, perceived efficacy, emotions (anger, hope, and fear) and identification (see Figure 1 for the conceptual model). Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis as an attempt to integrate responses to repression into a social psychological theory of political participation in repressive contexts:

**Hypothesis 4 a–d:** *The higher the level of grievances, perceived efficacy, mobilizing [demobilizing] emotions and identification, the more [less] willing they are to embrace risks of potential threats associated with engagement in activities (i.e. they resist repression).*

**Hypothesis 5 a–d:** *The higher the level of grievances, perceived efficacy, mobilizing [demobilizing] emotions and identification, the more [less] often individuals participate in political activities.*

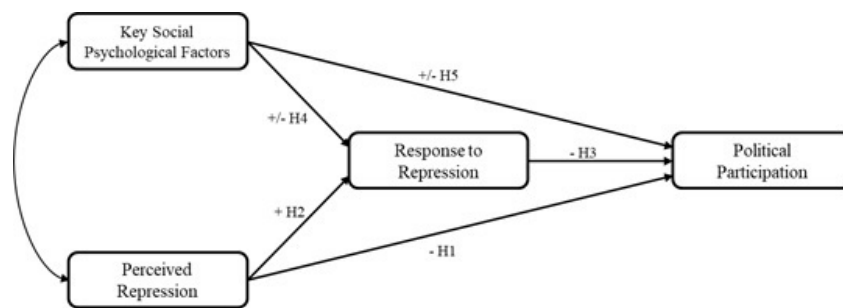
### 3. Methods and data<sup>3</sup>

Conducting research on sensitive topics in 'authoritarian fields' is challenging (Glasius et al., 2018). In Iran, too, independent academic surveying on certain topics, for example, protests, political prisoners and opposition groups, is hardly possible. Research in such settings is 'by its nature extraordinary and requires extra measures of effort and patience on the part of the researcher' (Malekzadeh, 2016, p. 865). The first author collected the data and made every effort to overcome barriers and gather reliable and valid data by relying on his own knowledge of the social context, a large, trustworthy network of political activists, and ample experience of political activism in Iran. Online questionnaires were used to ensure that respondents could participate anonymously, which makes preference falsification less likely (Farrell, 2012).

Our target group is IGM supporters. We define them as those who take a positive stance toward the movement. They form the 'mobilization potential' of the movement (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987). To reach IGM supporters, the first author relied on the same online networks and means that are usually used for mobilization. Hence, he replicated mobilization attempts of the IGM to recruit respondents. Key activists, bloggers, and administrators of well-known Facebook pages were asked to distribute the online questionnaire. To assure respondents that participation would be safe, they used some encouraging and trusting words. All in all, several influential activists were involved in distributing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was also advertised on one of the most influential IGM websites (IranGreenVoice.com).

The online survey was conducted in three waves in 2013: in February (W1), April (W2), and June (W3). In W1, respondents were asked to write down their e-mail addresses to track them for later waves. Of the 1051 respondents who completed the survey, 502 provided their e-mail addresses.



**Figure 1.** Summarizes the hypotheses and illustrates the conceptual model

In the subsequent two waves, the survey was sent again to them. About 40 per cent participated again in both the second and third waves. Moreover, in the last wave, shortly after the presidential elections in June 2013, the questionnaire was also distributed in a similar way as the first wave. In total, 1050 participants completed this survey. Including only eligible respondents of 18 years and older and excluding respondents living outside Iran, yields the following three datasets: W1 (N = 743), W3 (N = 732), and the panel data (N = 153).

The sampling strategy appears appropriate for our research purpose. We not only build trust among respondents, since about half of the initial sample provided us their e-mail addresses, but we also reached IGM supporters successfully. The past electoral behavior and engagement in IGM activities, as well as demographics of respondents, show the similarities of the sample group and IGM supporters.

#### 4. Measures

*Political participation (offline/online)* was measured by the following question: 'during the previous two months, how often did you participate in any of the following offline/online activities?', whereupon 21 and 16 activities, respectively, were presented for off- and online participation, respectively. Both off- and online activities were measured on a scale ranging from 1 ('never') to 5 ('very often').

To identify clusters of political participation, we employed factor analyses. These analyses revealed, respectively, four and three distinct dimensions within off- and online activism, which are conceptually distinguishable as well. Eventually, the fourth type of offline activities is excluded from further analyses, because this cluster includes low-frequency activities that were mostly employed in the midst of the 2009 protests, for instance, shouting 'Allah Akbar' from the rooftops. The identified clusters with some exemplary items are shown in Table 1 (For details of all analyses and descriptive statistics, see Honari, 2019).

*Everyday forms of resistance* (off- and online) refers to participation in some forms of political engagement that are not visible or public, but are nevertheless widespread, in particular in non-democratic societies (Bayat, 2013; Press,

2015). Chatting or off- and online elite formal activities require some level of skills and experiences in formal political activism. These are mainly overt activities. Next, the cluster including informal, non-institutionalized activities suitable for grassroots was labeled *grassroots informal* activities. *Internet-based (online) participation with high threshold* was coined by van Laer and van Aelst (2010, p. 1157) referring to 'actions that are made possible largely or totally thanks to the Internet, but demand more resources than signing a petition or sending an email'.

To measure *perceived repression* of off- and online activities, respondents were asked: 'How likely do you think it is that people who are politically active offline/online will face the following threats?' This question was followed by several threats such as 'Being arrested or detained', 'Being hurt by security forces' and 'Getting problems on the job or at university' for offline repression and 'Having their identities exposed against their wishes', 'Having their websites hacked or attacked' and 'Having their emails intercepted or data stolen' for online repression (For all items, see Honari, 2019). Answers for each item varied from 'very unlikely' (1) to 'very likely' (5). Perceived repression is the average of six items of threats for offline activities (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94 W1 and 0.94 W3) and ten items for online activities (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90 W1 and 0.92 W3).

To measure *response to repression*, we used the respondents' answers to the question 'How often, over the previous two months, did you refrain from aforementioned offline activities because you faced potential threats? (1 Never; 2 Rarely; 3 Sometimes; 4 Often; 5 All of the Time). The answer 'Never' to this question reflects a strong willingness to take more risks and resist repression, whereas the answer 'All of the Time' means the inclination to refrain.

To measure perceived efficacy of offline and online activities, we used two items tapping into two different dimensions: *individual efficacy* ('To what extent do you think that your own participation in offline/online activities contributes to the solution of political problems in Iran?') and *group efficacy* ('To what extent do you think that offline/online activities contributes to the solution of political problems in Iran?'). The answer categories ranged from 'not at all' (1) to 'very much' (5).

To measure *emotions*, respondents were asked how they felt when thinking about the situation in Iran. We included

**Table 1.** Dimensions of political participation

Mode	Label	Three exemplary items	# items	alpha
Offline	Everyday forms of resistance (EFR)	'Tried to change somebody's mind about social-political issues by talking face-to-face', 'Encouraged somebody to attend social-political event or support political activities by talking face-to-face', 'Wear a political symbol like green wristband'.	3	0.82
	Grassroots informal (GI)	'Participated in unauthorized street demonstration/rally/march', 'Attended a funeral gathering staged by political groups', 'Signed a petition or open letter'.	6	0.79
	Elite formal (EF)	'Attended a political meeting/talk/gathering', 'Contacted a politician, government or local government official', 'Financially or non-financially supported political prisoners' family'	5	0.70
Online	Everyday forms of resistance (EFR)	'Tried to change somebody's mind about social-political issues by using the Internet (chatting or commenting)', 'Shared political posts in online social networks such as Facebook plus etc.', 'Uploaded a photo or video for political purposes'	8	0.89
	High-threshold (HT)	Hacked a website or an e-mail address for political purposes', 'Participated in a block attempt for political purposes', 'Participated in a Twitter storm.'	3	0.48
	Elite formal (EF)	'Sent an e-mail to politicians' political websites or officials', 'Created a Facebook page, YouTube channel, blog etc. for political purposes', 'Attended an online political meeting (Paltalk Skype or Webinar).'	5	0.73

both mobilizing and demobilizing emotions. With regards to the former, both a 'negative emotion' (anger) and 'positive emotion' (hope) were selected. With regard to the latter, one 'negative emotion' (fear) was selected.

To assess *grievances*, we asked respondents: 'How satisfied are you with the following issues in Iran?' (1, very dissatisfied, to 5, very satisfied), whereupon the following issues were presented: social, political, economic, cultural, international situation, and status of religion in society. A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the six items, which showed that they tap one single dimension. Subsequently, the scores were reversed and a mean grievances scale was constructed (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84).

To tap into identity, we focused on *activist politicized identity*, the self-definition of an individual in terms of personal political attributes. This is operationalized as follows: 'Some people define themselves as a political, social or human rights etc. activist, others do not. To what extent do you define yourself as an activist?' ('not at all', 'not very much', 'somewhat', 'quite' and 'very much').

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Panel analysis: Investigating changes

How to explain political participation under severe and constant perceived repression? To answer this question, we carried out panel analyses and cross-sectional analyses. First, using the panel data, we examined changes in IGM supporters' perceived repression and their off- and online political participation between the three time periods (February, April, and June 2013). Table 2 reveals that there are no significant changes in the mean levels of perceived repression, neither off- nor online. This finding is aligned with the theoretical argument discussed above that scholars should distinguish

'objective' repression – what states do – from 'subjective' repression – what individuals perceive (Kurzman, 1996; Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991). While some observers may argue that the government loosens restrictions on oppositional activities run-up to the elections, the findings show that people may not perceive this policy change accordingly.

In contrast, the intensity of political participation of the respondents varied in the same period. In February–April, there were neither signals that the government intended to hold fair elections (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2013; Rivetti, 2013), nor societal signals of enthusiasm to participate in the elections. Therefore, from April to February political participation of respondents decreased significantly. However, in late March, a group of young IGM activists urged Khatami to run in the upcoming presidential elections. They believed that a candidate with a strong appeal could convince people to vote and reunite the movement factions into one tactic. This triggered the consequent mobilizations (Honari, 2019). Similarly, the data show that between April and June political participation of IGM supporters increased. Interestingly, IGM supporters' responses to repression also significantly changed during this last period, the two months prior to the elections. In fact, while the level of perceived repression is stable, our respondents apparently attached less importance to repression over time, both for potential threats because of off- and online participation.

We zoom in on the period that political activism flared up (April–June 2013, or T2–T3). Hence, we examine the data gathered immediately after the 2013 elections, in which respondents reported their activities over the previous two months, covering the last weeks of the electoral campaign. To do this, we used the larger dataset T3 (N = 719).

Let us first look at whether differences in IGM supporters' inclination to refrain from political activities because of potential threats (i.e. all the time, sometimes, often, rarely,

**Table 2.** Overall means of the variables of three waves (February, April, and June 2013)

	T1 Mean	T2 Mean	T3 Mean	T1-T2	T1-T3	T2-T3
Repression						
Perceived repression (Offline)	4.30	4.35	4.30			
Perceived repression (Online)	3.91	3.90	3.92			
Political Participation						
Overall political participation (Offline)	1.52	1.39	1.62	***	**	***
Everyday forms of resistance	1.50	1.39	1.59			**
Grassroots informal	1.43	1.24	1.69	**	**	***
Elite formal	1.32	1.27	1.36			
Overall political participation (Online)	1.95	1.77	2.08	***	**	***
Everyday forms of resistance	2.51	2.23	2.71	**	+	***
High-threshold	1.22	1.19	1.23			
Elite formal	1.50	1.39	1.59			**
Response to Repression						
The importance of potential threats (Offline)	2.88	2.85	2.34		***	***
The importance of potential threats (Online)	2.65	2.65	2.30		**	***

Source: Panel Data (N = 153).

and never) are related to demographic factors, such as age and gender. Before we test our hypotheses, we briefly discuss the descriptive statistics and the result of one-way ANOVA tests, as shown in Tables 3 and 4. These tables demonstrate that there are no significant socio-demographic differences between (almost all) categories of responses to offline and online repression. Put differently, IGM supporters' gender, age, and education level cannot account for why some of them were more inclined to embrace the risks associated with engagement in political activities than others.<sup>4</sup>

## 5.2. Cross-sectional analyses: testing hypotheses

To test our hypotheses, we used structural equation modeling employing STATA.<sup>5</sup> We first focus on the *direct* effects of perceived repression (H2) and social-psychological drivers (H4) on individuals' responses to repression. The findings show that perceived repression is significantly associated with responses to repression, for both off- and online activities (H2 supported): the greater individuals perceive repression, the more likely it is that they take account of potential threats associated with activism. Moreover, the findings show strong effects of both grievances and fear on response to repression: IGM supporters who are less aggrieved and more fearful are more strongly inclined to refrain from political activities, be it online or offline, because of possible threats (H4a and H4c partially supported). Perceived efficacy, anger and hope, as well as politicized identity, do not significantly influence people's response to repression, that is, they do not affect IGM supporters' willingness to take risks associated with activism.

Subsequently, we test the direct effects of perceived repression (H1), responses to repression (H3) and social-psychological drivers (H5) on an individual's degree of political participation. It is apparent that there is no direct effect of perceived repression on political participation (H1 is rejected), except for everyday forms of resistance

(online). Furthermore, the effect of the response to repression on political participation is significant for everyday forms of resistance (H3 supported, but only for everyday forms of resistance): supporters who indicated that possible threats often deterred them, indeed less often took part in everyday forms of resistance, such as trying to change someone's mind during face-to-face or online conversations or encouraging others to attend political events. Interestingly, individuals' engagement in the other two forms of political participations, including participating in marches/demonstrations (GI: 'grassroots informal') and contacting politicians (EF: 'elite formal'), is neither affected by perceptions of repression nor the willingness to take risks.

Next, individual activist identity and individual efficacy have direct effects on mostly all forms of off- and online political participation (H5b and H5d supported): supporters who define themselves as political activist and perceive their own actions efficacious are more likely to participate in off- and online political activities. Remarkably, grievances and fear do not directly influence individuals' engagement in different forms of political participation (H5a not supported). Zooming in on mobilizing emotions, we find that while hope enhances participation in everyday forms of online and offline resistance, anger only increases high-threshold online political participation and grassroots informal forms of offline political participation (H5c partially supported).

Figures 2 and 3 compare the effects between different clusters of offline and online political participation, respectively. For the sake of clarity of the comparison, only one box for political participation is shown. The arrows represent significant relationships.

Focusing first on *offline* political participation, Figure 2 shows that identification as activist significantly influences all three different clusters of participation, whereas grievances, fear, and perceived repression do not have any direct effect on people's engagement in political participation.



**Table 3.** Analysis of variance (ANOVA) between different responses to offline repression and socio-demographics

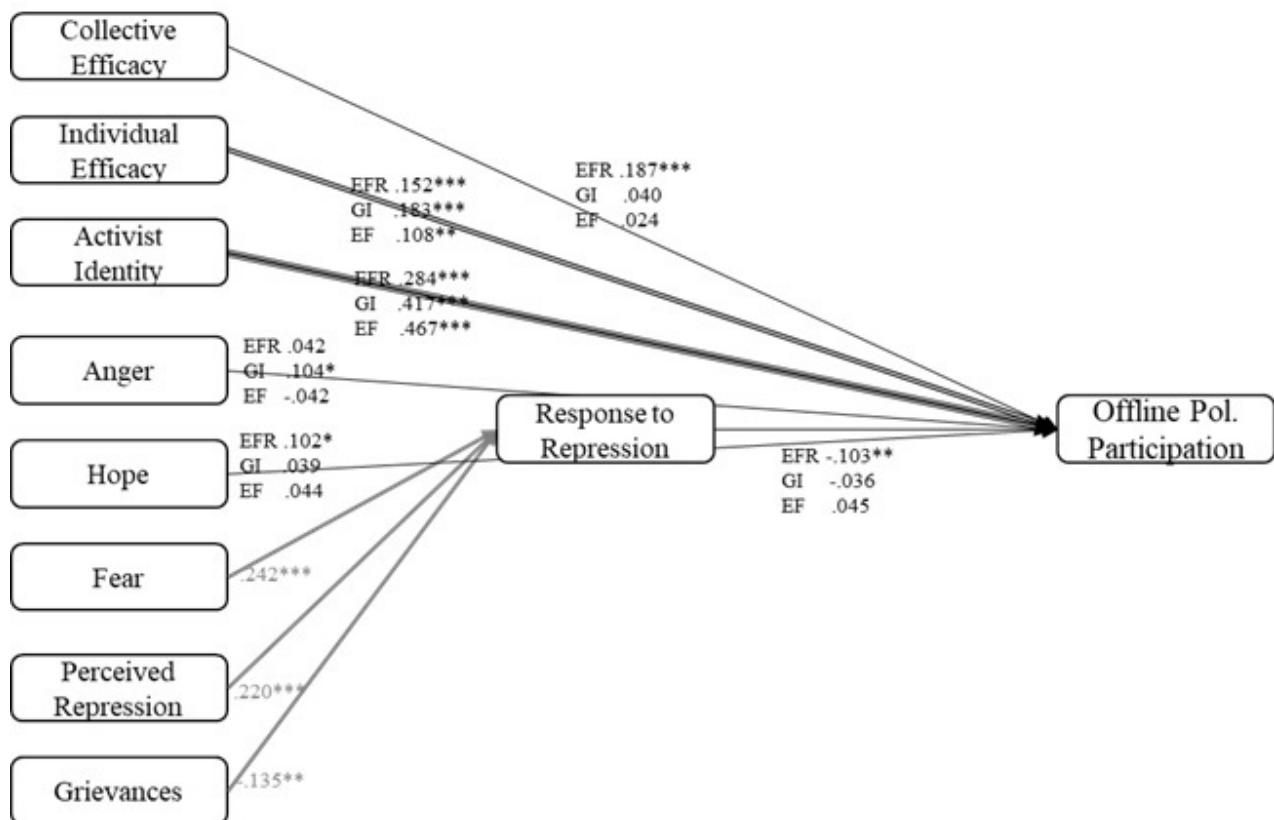
	All of the time	Sometimes	Often	Rarely	Never	Total	F	Prob > F
Gender (Male = 1)	1.26	1.35	1.34	1.36	1.39	<b>1.36</b>	0.90	
Age	30.08	31.90	30.45	31.11	31.41	<b>31.08</b>	0.96	
Education	4.15	4.53	4.39	4.47	4.29	<b>4.37</b>	2.67	*
Political Interest	2.85	2.90	2.98	3.05	2.95	<b>2.97</b>	0.94	
Frequency	65	93	151	164	246	<b>719</b>		

Notes: \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

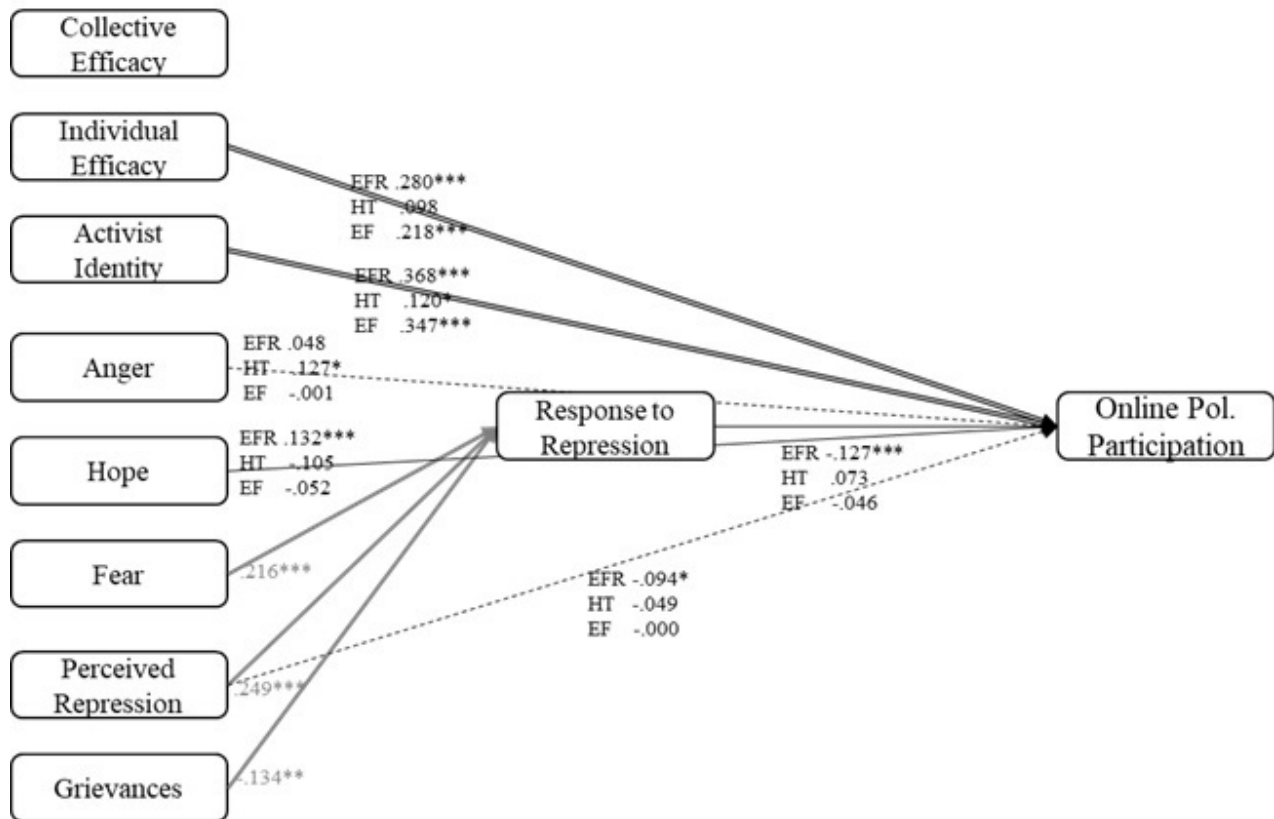
**Table 4.** Analysis of variance (ANOVA) between different responses to online repression and socio-demographics

	All of the time	Sometimes	Often	Rarely	Never	Total	F	Prob > F
Gender (Male = 1)	1.36	1.32	1.32	1.35	1.39	<b>1.36</b>	0.64	
Age	30.69	32.45	30.73	30.71	31.13	<b>31.08</b>	0.96	
Education	4.34	4.34	4.53	4.28	4.34	<b>4.37</b>	1.72	
Political Interest	2.87	2.82	3.02	3.03	2.97	<b>2.97</b>	12.97	
Frequency	61	88	148	147	275	<b>719</b>		

**Figure 2.** Comparison of significant effects between three clusters of offline political participation. Note: Only significant effects are shown. Single, double and triple lines represent one, two, and three significant effects, respectively.



**Figure 3.** Comparison of significant effects between three clusters of online political participation/Note: Only significant effects are shown. Single, double and triple lines represent one, two, and three significant effects, respectively.



For *online* modes of political participation (Figure 3), we observe almost the same similarities and differences among clusters. Individuals' responses to repression affects participation in everyday forms of resistance, and there are no direct effects of feelings of fear and grievances on people's levels of participation. Only high-threshold online activism is directly boosted by anger, while individual engagement in the two other forms of participation is enhanced by other motives such as individual efficacy, activist identity and (partly) hope. As mentioned above, individuals who attach more importance to the risks associated with activism (i.e. they score higher on 'responses to repression') are significantly less often engaged in everyday forms of online and offline resistance, but it surprisingly does not affect the levels of engagement in the four other clusters of political participation. In fact, the mediation effect of response to repression between fear, perceived repression and grievances and political participation is only significant for everyday forms of resistance. Therefore it is interesting to zoom in on this particular cluster of political participation, which we will do in the next section.

Finally, we turn our attention to indirect and total effects on people's participation in everyday forms resistance: our causal model implies that both perceived repression and social-psychological drivers affect participation indirectly, mediated *via* responses to repression. Tables 5 and 6

present the direct, indirect and total effects of social-psychological factors and perceived repression on everyday forms of offline and online resistance. Concerning *offline* political participation, our results show that perceived repression has a negative indirect effect through individual responses to repression. This means that IGM supporters who perceive less repression are more strongly inclined to embrace to the risks associated with activism, and in turn more often politically active. The same conclusion holds for *online* participation. However, online and offline participation also differ in an important respect, namely: perceived repression has a *direct* and *total* negative effect on online participation, but not on offline participation.

Furthermore, our findings show that fear and grievances have also indirect effects on everyday forms of online and offline resistance: IGM supporters who are less fearful and more aggrieved tend to attach less importance to potential risks associated with activism, and are therefore more politically active.

We can summarize our findings in the three following conclusions: first, perceived repression, grievances, and fear influence people's response to repression. Second, in general, other social-psychological motives, including perceived efficacy, activist identity and mobilizing emotions (hope and anger), do not affect individuals' response to repression. And, finally, responses to repression, grievances, and fear

**Table 5.** Direct/indirect/total effects on everyday forms of offline resistance (standardized coefficients)

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Perceived repression (offline)	−0.049	−0.090**	−0.139
Response to repression (offline)	−0.090**		−0.090**
Grievances	0.185	0.035*	0.221*
Anger	0.043	−0.005	0.038
Hope	0.109*	0.001	0.110*
Fear	0.006	−0.027*	−0.020
Group efficacy (offline)	0.233***	0.004	0.237***
Individual efficacy (offline)	0.183***	0.007	0.190***
Activist politicized identity	0.320***	−0.008	0.312***

Notes: \*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level; \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Table 6.** Direct/indirect/Total effects on everyday forms of online resistance (standardized coefficients)

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Perceived repression (online)	−0.235*	−0.079***	−0.314**
Response to repression (online)	—	0.079***	−0.079***
Grievances	0.132 <sup>+</sup>	0.031*	0.163*
Anger	0.035	0.000	0.036
Hope	0.101***	0.001	0.102***
Fear	0.008	−0.021**	−0.013
Group efficacy (online)	0.024	0.004	0.027
Individual efficacy (online)	0.249***	0.004	0.252***
Activist politicized identity	0.296***	−0.001	0.295***

Notes: \*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level; \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

play a mediating role between perceived repression and individuals' engagement in everyday forms of resistance.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to examine political participation of Iranian Green Movement supporters during the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections. The last-minute boost of electoral support for Rouhani in June 2013 largely resulted from a boom in political engagement of IGM supporters (Honari, 2019). To better account for this remarkable increase in political participation, this article conceptualized and integrated the notion of individuals' choices in response to repression in a social-psychological approach to explaining social movement participation. Geographically speaking, the social movement scholarship has predominantly focused on Western Europe and the United States, countries in

which activists hardly face any substantial personal risks (Ayanian and Tausch, 2016).

Our findings, first, revealed that the perceived level of repression among IGM activists, on average, did not significantly change during the six months leading up to the election day, nor during the two months preceding the elections on 14 June 2013. In contrast, IGM activists' responses to this perceived constant level of repression significantly changed during these two months (May–June 2013): possible threats less often steered IGM supporters away from political activism. This resembles what (Kurzman, 2012, p. 377) summarized as 'sudden prominence of bravery' during the Arab Spring – the increased readiness to engage in risky protest, despite the unchanged severe levels of repression.

Second, our analysis has shown that during the two months prior to the elections, those IGM supporters who were more fearful and perceived higher levels of repression were more often discouraged to resist repression rather than to refrain. Having more grievances had the opposite effect: individuals who were more aggrieved were more inclined to embrace the risks of potential threats. Remarkably, other emotions (anger and hope) and other social-psychological participation motives (efficacy and identification) did not affect people's response to repression; thus, these factors did not play a significant role in shaping how people cope with potential threats associated with engagement in political activities.

Regarding emotions, for most forms of participation, this article reaffirmed that 'anger is not likely to produce organized collective action' (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001, p. 31). However, our findings showed that anger in fact contributes to individuals' engagement in some forms of political participation, namely grassroots informal activities (offline) and high-threshold online activities. We moreover found that feelings of hope stimulate participation in everyday forms of resistance, both online and offline.

The findings also showed that, in terms of the form of political participation, IGM supporters' responses to repression vary. Our distinction of different clusters of political activism acknowledges that potential participants have a variety of activities at their disposal and therefore, when they decide to resist repression, they can choose from a repertoire of political activities. In this regard, our analyses indicate that increasing 'bravery' (not being deterred by potential threats and/or harm) stimulates engagement in everyday forms of resistance of IGM supporters, but not other forms of political activities. These activities (such as trying to change someone's mind during face-to-face or online conversations or encouraging others to attend political events) entail lower risk, or their attendant risks are more manageable, while they are crucial and important for social movements in repressive contexts (Press, 2015). We presume that this finding illustrates that social movement supporters cannot only simply ignore risks and continue with the same activity, as Ayanian and Tausch (2016) highlighted by explicating the subjective importance of risk, but can also find, choose or invent another, new form of political activity.

Individuals, indeed, can participate in non-public and unobtrusive political actions whose risks are more manageable, such as using face-to-face or online social networks to change somebody's mind or mobilizing others to support political activities. This suggests that, in addition to risk-taking, the capability of managing risk is also crucial for resisting repression.

Regarding off- and online mode of political participation, our findings underline earlier claim that the motivational dynamics of off- and online activities differ (Brunsting and Postmes, 2002). There is a notable difference in motivations between off- and online activism. Remarkably, efficacy is not related with offline activism, while it positively affects the level in which people engage in online activities. Our findings thus confirm the greater importance of perceived efficacy in online activities. As several scholars have emphasized (e.g. Lynch, 2011), online political activities have increasingly become unfavourable because of the growing practice of state repression on the Internet. Our results suggest that in repressive contexts, choosing online activities depends significantly on how social movement supporters perceive the efficacy of online activities compared with the efficacy of offline activities. The more activists deem online participation efficacious, the more likely that they apparently ignore repression or attach less importance to the risks associated with repression.

Taken together, this article acknowledges that the effect of repression on participation in a social movement (deterrence or escalation) is conditioned by two individual perceptions and decisions: whether one attaches much value on risks associated with activism, and (if inclined to resisting despite possible threats) in which form of political activity to participate. These interconnected perceptions and decisions, which can be conceptualized as an individual's response to repression, are influenced by social-psychological factors such as fear, grievances and perceived repression.

The principal theoretical implication of this study is to place choices of individuals into the theoretical explanation of repression effects. This conclusion is less obvious as it might seem: scholars have often hypothesized and investigated macro-effects of state repression on individual participation, without accounting for the underlying micro-level mechanisms; moreover, they have tended to lump a variety of action forms together under the catchall label 'participation' (Ward, 2016). In most of the existing research on repression, power and agency are largely attributed to States, but not to social movements and individuals (Zwerman and Steinhoff, 2005). By shifting the attention from state repression to individuals' responses to repression, this article speaks for an approach that goes beyond the victimization of people toward seeing States and dissidents equally as strategic actors having choices and agency (Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2005). Investigating the factors which determine the individuals' choices to respond to state repression link macro to micro (Jasper, 2004; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). It also provides a broader picture of activities under repression and suggests paying more attention to activities that are not public and disruptive but

rather widespread and crucial, that is, such as everyday forms of resistance and diverse strategies to manage the risk of political participations.

This study is not without limitations. First of all, the specific context of this study prompts the question to what extent our findings are generalizable to every instance of social movement activity. We focused on the 2013 presidential electoral campaign period, when the primary goal of IGM activities was influencing the election results (including turnout). The approaching elections and the unfolding campaign provided an important incentive for IGM supporters to become more active again, despite an unchanged perception of repressive threats from the state. This politicized situation gives more room to some sorts of covert activities that aim to mobilize or change relatives and friends' minds through trustful relationships. Politicization of society paves the way to generate political discussions in personal networks (Opp and Gern, 1993). Nevertheless, in the cycle of protests, the repertoire of political activities is more limited to overt protest participation. In this case, ignoring repression and the risk-taking of an activity would matter more in response to repression than managing risks and shifting activities.

As we have already pointed out, the generalization of findings to all Iranian opposition supporters should be made with caution because of possible sample bias. In spite of its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the variation in political activities under severe repression and draws our attention to a fruitful area for further work: individual agency and responses to repression.

## Notes

1. The role that Twitter itself played in the Iranian Green Movement is questioned by several scholars. As Lynch (2011, p. 303), amongst others, states, the role of Twitter for the organization and mobilization of IGM has been 'greatly exaggerated' (for a detailed discussion on Twitter use during IGM protests see: Honari 2015). Yet, the term 'Twitter Revolution' can be used to refer to the influential role of the Internet and social networks in general.
2. For instance, see the debate in Radio Farda with the focal question: "After almost three years, what has become known as the Green Movement, does such a movement exist today?" [https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3\\_viewpoint\\_green\\_movement\\_iran/24610419.html](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_viewpoint_green_movement_iran/24610419.html)
3. For more details about the research design and data, see Honari 2019 and online supplementary materials.
4. The only exception is educational level. Nevertheless, the post-hoc test, pairwise comparison, using Bonferroni, Scheffe, and Sidak methods in Stata did not show any significant differences in the average educational level between any pairs of groups.
5. The results for offline and online political participation, respectively, are shown in Tables A3 and A4 in the online supplementary material

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Online supplementary material for “Refraining or resisting: responses of Green Movement supporters to repression during the 2013 Iranian presidential elections”.

## Author Information

**Ali Honari** holds a PhD in sociology from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His research interests include social movements, political participation, repression, and political communication. He is an Iran expert and a frequent contributor of several journals devoted to Iranian social and political issues.

**Jasper Muis** is Assistant Professor at the Sociology Department of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His research interests include social movements and political participation. His 2012 dissertation about the rise of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands received the Dutch Research Prize of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation.